

Importance of Buffalo to Native Americans - Notes

At the time when the first white settlers were moving west, there were about two dozen Plains Indian tribes that depended, some more than others, on the buffalo. The tribes of the eastern prairies depended upon the buffalo less than those of the western plains. This was due in part to the fact that they were also farmers and lived in permanent lodges for part of the year. The tribes of the eastern prairies were the Arikara, Hidatsa, Iowa, Kansa, Mandan, Missouri, Omaha, Osage, Oto, Pawnee, Ponca, Santee Sioux, Yankton Sioux, and Wichita. The Indians of the western plains depended upon the great herds for virtually all of their needs, both material and spiritual. There were eleven tribes of these Indians: the Arapaho, Assiniboin, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Comanche, Crow, Gros Ventre, Kiowa, Kiowa-Apache, Sarsi, and Teton Sioux. The random wandering of the buffalo over the plains forced these Indians to adopt a nomadic lifestyle. As the buffalo moved in search of greener grass, the Indians picked up all their possessions and moved with them.

The buffalo was the central feature of Plains Indian culture. The Indians believed the Great Spirit put buffalo on the Earth to provide for them. Buffalo provided food, shelter, clothing, fuel, toys, ceremonial objects, and weapons among other things. Almost all the parts of the buffalo were used including the bones, teeth, tail, hair, skin, muscle fiber, tendons, horns, skull, meat, fat, tongue, dung, hooves, intestines, and brain. Tipis were made from buffalo skin as were clothes and moccasins; warm robes for the cold months were made from the hide and its thick wool; water jugs were made from the

bladders; tools were made from bones; and buffalo dung was used for fuel. Even small boats called bullboats were made from buffalo skin.

According to Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux, "the buffalo is the chief of all animals and represents the earth, the totality of all that is."The buffalo was a sacred animal to the Plains Indians, a central part of their mythology and their religion. For example, the Pawnee believed that the Milky Way was formed by dust left by the spirit-buffalo. The Mandan performed the Bull Dance as part of a ceremony to ensure success during the buffalo hunt. The Blackfoot tribe performed a ritual dance called the Buffalo Dance before and after each hunt as a special way of thanking the buffalo for sacrificing some of their own so that they could survive.

Buffalo were hunted during all seasons of the year except for the coldest months of winter. Indian tribes on the Great Plains followed the seasonal movements of the buffalo. As the buffalo moved onto the open plains during the warmer months and then back to sheltered valleys and wooded areas during the winter, the Indians followed them, changing their hunting methods to match the terrain.